

Making Rural Areas Attractive for Teachers and Principals: Putting Rural Educational Settings on the Agenda

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ABSTRACT

One cornerstone in the ‘Nordic model of education’ is equal opportunities in education (Frønes et al., 2020), however, the curricula of the Nordic countries are adapted to urban environments (Bæck, 2016). Regional-spatial aspects of education therefore need to be identified to find solutions to equal education. In this re-analysis of two research projects in Sweden and Finland, new insights are highlighted regarding how to develop nationwide equal education. The study proposes establishing supportive structures in the education of teachers and principals and in their continuing professional development in order to bring about equal education.

Keywords: *equal education, rural, remote, small rural schools, spatial justice*

Introduction

According to Imsen et al. (2017), the so-called ‘Nordic model of education’ was initiated during the decade after World War II to rebuild society and create a safe welfare state with reduced social differences. The Nordic model did not have any distinct point of departure, but rather grew as a political discourse (Eckhardt Larsen & Thue, 2022). The Nordic model consisted of public, comprehensive schooling for all children between the ages of seven to sixteen years. Imsen et al. (2017, p. 568) proposed that ‘the overarching

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values were social justice, equity, equal opportunities, inclusion, nation building, and democratic participation for all students, regardless of social and cultural background and abilities.’ They additionally concluded that the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland) implemented the model and these ideals somewhat differently and following different timelines from the 1950s to the 1970s. The Nordic model of education is built on either local or global and general values, and an ‘attempt to construct a national education system on the foundation of specific local values and practices, but at the same time subject to international conditions and influences...’ (Antikainen, 2006 p. 230). Some people also argue that the Nordic model never existed as more than a discourse to keep the countries together (Thue et al., 2022). Antikainen (2006) problematized this and proposed that ‘instead of one model, there are models or just patterns’ (p. 240). While the Nordic model of education may be an ideal, the national education systems in the Nordic countries differ across a range of aspects.

Since the late 1980s and 1990s, decentralization, deregulation and commercialization policies have influenced the school systems to various degrees and led to shifts in Nordic education systems (Frímansson, 2006; Oftedal Telhaug et al., 2006). The intention of decentralization was to enable local adaptations of education, but in rural areas this was constrained due to material arrangements, such as distances, finances and time (Rød & Karlsen Bæck, 2020). Furthermore, Lundahl (2016) stresses the differences between the educational policies of the Nordic countries stemming from differences in traditions, rural characteristics and public management practices. Historically though, the Nordic countries still have common ground in their aim of equal provision of education at all levels. Other commonalities that define the Nordic dimension are that pupils are provided free health care, special education, career counselling and school transportation. In Finland and Sweden free school meals are also provided on school days (Lundahl, 2016).

Although researchers seem to be quite convinced that there are some common aspects and values in the Nordic school systems, they have apparently also identified differences in the interpretation and realization of the aims, both historically and in present times. However, the manner in which education is provided and organised for all children, regardless of geographical background, seems to have been somewhat overlooked as a question in Nordic research literature focusing on the Nordic model(s) of education. What can be called ‘the modern encounter between neoliberal educational policy and Nordic egalitarianism’ (Veenis, 2017, p. 638), however, becomes especially visible in rural contexts. Schools may be the last public institution where much more than education takes place, as they are places where social bonds are also created in the community (Karlberg-Granlund, 2011).

Research into rural education is often conducted in Anglo-American countries such as US, Australia, UK and Canada. While the Nordic countries can learn from this research, as Krejsler and Moos (2021) state, there are differences between these educational settings and the Nordic educational contexts, with dissimilar histories and traditions. As an example, even though the US education system has adopted the slogan

of 'no child left behind', the Nordic countries seem to be more focused on equality (Giersch et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the different Nordic countries have handled this aspiration for equality differently, partly due to the geography of each country (Frønes et al., 2020). The Nordic education systems are sometimes reflected as being homogeneous, but can they possibly be so when the very national settings of the Nordic countries differ so much (Beach, From et al., 2018; Beach, Johansson et al., 2018; Bæck, 2016; Rød & Karlsen Bæck, 2020)?

The aim of this study is to advance the dialogue about the Nordic models by focusing on professional learning in small rural schools. As the curricula of the Nordic countries are often shaped for urban environments, thus leading to national inequality (Bæck, 2016), regional-spatial aspects of educational equality need to be thoroughly identified and analysed to find new solutions. Finland and Sweden have different educational systems, which affect rural education and national equality in different ways. Furthermore, the organisation of professional learning for teachers and principals differs in the two countries. International research highlights that professional learning is fundamental to preventing the inequality that may emerge between rural and urban education (Angelle et al., 2021). As such, this article examines two research questions:

- How do the different practice architectures in Finland and Sweden prefigure the professional learning of teachers and principals in small rural schools?
- What support would be appropriate for attracting teachers and principals to rural areas?

Knowledge regarding rural education in the Nordics

There is a research gap concerning rural education in the Nordic countries (Beach, Johansson et al., 2018; Cranston, 2011; Pettersson & Ström, 2019). Bæck (2016) explains that there is knowledge of the geographical periphery in studies focused on other knowledge interests. An example of this is Lundström et al. (2017) who, in passing, mention that the issue of competition between upper secondary schools becomes a non-issue in rural areas since the inhabitants there are more focused on the preservation of the local secondary school than school choice (Fjellman, 2019; Varjo et al., 2016). Another example that mentions opportunities in passing is Jarl (2013), who describes that small schools differ from larger schools in that the relationships between teachers and principals are stronger in small schools.

One common cornerstone of Nordic education is democracy. It was in the name of democracy that the management of schooling was moved from the government to municipality level (Kvalsund, 2009; Varjo et al., 2016). This generated more administrative tasks for principals as managers and a greater demand for them to become leaders for the educational development of their school (Jarl, 2013; Kvalsund, 2009; Larzén-Östermark, 2011). Additionally, the municipalities, as education providers, were given the responsibility and autonomy to organise the local network of schools. However, as economic resources were sparse, this presented a challenge to

the aspiration of equal education nationwide (Rød & Karlsen Bæck, 2020). In Nordic rural areas the decentralization of schooling resulted in the threat of closures (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Karlberg-Granlund, 2011; Kvalsund, 2009; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). In Sweden, the responsibility for school provision was decentralized in 1992. In Finland and Norway the governments had financed grants for the provision of a dense network of schools but these grants were stopped at the beginning of the 1990s. In Finland a special allowance for small schools was terminated in 2006. Such decentralization changes the circumstances for rural schools because geographically peripheral municipalities have lower tax revenues and thus a smaller budget with which to conduct school activities (Bæck, 2016; Norén Bretzer, 2016; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995), resulting in the closure of small school units in communities that are within commuting distance to larger schools (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020). The reason for this is that small schools are more expensive to run than larger schools, as they require a greater teacher density and incur greater local costs per student (Andræ Thelin & Solstad, 2005; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Norén Bretzer, 2016; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

Research including Knutas (2017) and Solstad and Karlberg-Granlund (2020) has described the position of rural and small schools in the Nordic welfare model, which in turn has been affected by global influences such as new public management trends which have caused public administrations to drive economic efficiencies through increased competition. Further, Abalde (2014) and Tantarimäki and Törhönen (2020) indicate that local authorities tend to consolidate and close schools to reduce costs, without fully grasping the consequences. Although the Finnish Basic Education Act of 1998 stipulates that a child should be assigned to a 'neighbourhood school', which makes school travel as short and safe as possible, to ensure adequate equity in education across the country, this basic right to education has come under threat. The Basic Education Act also entitles pupils to free transportation if the home-to-school distance exceeds 5 km, or if the travel conditions are difficult given the child's age. For pupils under 13 years old, the time for daily travel to school is now permitted to be two and a half hours including waiting time. According to evaluations of the basic education services though, these time limits have been exceeded in many places.

In Sweden, school closures have led to principals being responsible for more school units with long distances between the school units (Lund, 2022; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). Distances between school units affect the everyday lives of principals since a large part of the working day is spent travelling (Lund, 2022), which increases stress and reduces the time available for educational discussions (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). In Sweden it has been shown that this formally decentralized principalship of schools creates a professional distance between principals and teachers (Brante, 2014; Jarl, 2013; Jarl et al., 2012; Lindberg et al., 2015; Nordin, 2014; Varjo et al., 2016). Professional distance combined with the geographical distances constrain leadership practices in terms of professional learning.

Professional learning in rural education

Teachers' site-based and joint learning about their profession is seen as fundamental to improving students' study outcomes, which is why research into such learning is a growing area (Kennedy, 2014). Even though learning is site-based according to all practice theories, the theory of practice architectures (TPA) describes the architectures in the form of social, material and discursive arrangements that enable and constrain the sayings, doings and relating in practice. These practices do not unfold in a vacuum, they are pre-programmed in some way, and the sites have a 'pre-existing historical and cultural context'. Kemmis (2021) believes that learning is and should be understood as a process in practice:

Practice theory needs a view of learning that, in addition, accounts for the process of learning: a view of learning in practice ... learning involves the reproduction (with variation) and transformation of practices, and the production of new practices: a view of learning as coming to know how to go on in practices or coming to be able to go on in practices, or coming to participate differently in practices, or, most simply, coming to practise differently. (Kemmis, 2021, p. 282)

He thus describes learning as knowledge formation and practice formation in some sense (Kemmis (Kemmis et al., 2014), unlike Schatzki (2017), for example, who describes learning as a process of acquiring knowledge. On the basis that all professionals come to practice differently, and that learning takes place through the development of practices, learning is not individual but something that takes place in practices, at the same time as the practices are shaped.

From a Nordic perspective, studies on professional learning in the geographical periphery are limited. In Norway differences between low and high-performing rural schools were identified by Forfang and Paulsen (2021). Their study indicates that high performance in rural schools is correlated with the principal being a facilitator of educational settings, a supervisor of teachers and performing classroom visits. In Sweden, Pettersson and Ström (2019) highlight teachers' knowledge development in special education when special-needs teachers are responsible for many schools that are geographically dispersed. They believe that peripheral areas in Sweden have different circumstances to those that usually occur in research descriptions, since the areas consist of small school units that are located a long way from the municipality's administrative centre, where special education, administrators, principals and other functions often are located. 'The schools need to find solutions to bridge the distance between the rural schools and the special education expertise based in municipal administrative centres' (Pettersson & Ström, 2019, p. 194). Relationships and cooperation enable teachers to get the support they need in rural areas, while distance limits support available to teachers (Pettersson et al., 2016). It is therefore important for professional learning to be adapted to rural areas (Klar et al., 2019).

Professional learning in education can be viewed as a resource for achieving equality (Angelle et al., 2021). This study builds on this knowledge and aims to exemplify how professional learning takes place in rural settings, and how different arrangements may affect the practice of professional learning. On the basis that all professionals come to practice differently (Kemmis, 2021), and that learning takes place through the development of practices, learning is not individual but something that takes place in practices, at the same time as the practices are shaped. The understanding and discussion of our data is inspired by theories that view these architectures as being important for how the practices emerge.

Methods and contexts of the study

In addition to the rural location of the schools, smallness is also a common denominator for the cases in this study. The smallest of schools are often neglected in studies aimed at analysing similarities and differences in the Nordic models of education, as well as in statistical overviews. Qualitative studies are needed to identify the characteristics of small Nordic schools and rural contexts (Beach, From et al., 2018; Beach, Johansson et al., 2018). ‘Small’ and ‘small-scale’ are relative concepts, however. They are always considered in relation to something else characterised as larger. The number of pupils defines which schools are considered small. Internationally, a small primary school usually has fewer than 100 pupils (Anderson, 2010). In Finland, schools with fewer than 50 pupils are referred to as small schools (Hyyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015). In 2020 there were 369 schools with fewer than 50 pupils in Finland, and 349 with 50–100 pupils (Education Statistics Finland, 2022). In Sweden there is no general definition of small schools, but the Swedish National Agency for Education sets a range of 1–49 pupils, which encompasses around 500 schools (SCB, 2021), but this number includes special schools for pupils with special needs (SKR, 2018). The number of small schools in Sweden is decreasing, but the quality of small schools is not affected by their size (SKR, 2018). If a small school is defined by the number of teachers, then the definition is three qualified, licensed teachers or less, of which there are 55 schools in Sweden.

The Swedish case

The Swedish data was generated in 2018 via an ethnographic study of leadership of professional learning in rural areas. The research consisted of participatory observation of three small rural schools and follow-up conversations with four principals and six teachers employed in these three schools. If professional learning was organised in the principal district, this also was observed. The schools observed had fewer than 20 pupils and three teachers or less. Four principals, six teachers and two pre-school teachers participated in the study.

The Finnish case

The Finnish case focused on experiences from a professional development project for teachers and principals in small rural schools, initiated by an in-service

education organisation (Centre for lifelong learning) at the university, and financed by the Finnish National Board of Education during the years 2010–2014. This so-called ‘Sa@lute’ project was initiated further to research indicating that teachers in small and rural schools needed both formal and informal support networks as well as possibilities for confidential dialogues about the challenges and dilemmas of their work. The project was for teachers and principals working in Swedish-speaking comprehensive schools. Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish.¹ In 2020, about 5.2 percent of the population consisted of Swedish-speaking Finns (https://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html). The researcher served as the facilitator and project leader for the in-service education project, and the results have previously been presented in Olin, Karlberg-Granlund and Furu (2016). Ten teaching principals participated in the project. They worked in schools with 20–70 pupils. Although school closures have taken place due to diminishing numbers of pupils and for political reasons, many of the Swedish-speaking comprehensive schools are still small. They are located in widespread geographical areas, both in the archipelago on islands and in the rural mainland. Furthermore, small Swedish-speaking minority schools exist in the bigger cities, on so called ‘language-islands’.

The data from these studies and the knowledge from the analysis of this data has provided the foundation for our discussions regarding similarities and differences in the arrangement of professional learning in rural education. We have identified some national-level arrangements for professional learning that have a particular impact on professional learning in rural areas.

Findings

The findings section presents common themes that were found in the data. First, the education of teachers and principals will be explained as an arrangement for the professional learning, and then the practices of professional learning and its arrangements will be explained. The findings are clustered into different themes to describe differences and similarities in the arrangements of professional learning.

Professional education as an arrangement for professional learning in small rural schools

As mentioned above, decentralization of schooling took different forms in Finland and Sweden. The Swedish education system has system independent schools that are allowed to be listed on the stock market, while Finland has a stronger governmental linkage (Varjo et al., 2018). In Sweden this has changed the principals’ responsibility and led to the professionalization of principals separate to the teachers’ profession (Jarl, 2013; Jarl et al., 2012; Norberg, 2019). Sweden has thus had mandatory in-service principal education since 2008 (Ekholm, 2015). One reason for such

1 There are also other languages whose users’ rights are laid down in law (https://www.kotus.fi/en/on_language/languages_of_finland).

mandatory education was the differences in municipal participation (Norberg, 2019). The national education of principals is regulated by the Swedish National Agency for Education and is provided by a number of universities as a contracted education programme comprising three years of compulsory in-service education. Principals must have finished the programme before they have worked for four years. Due to the mandatory part of the principal education programme, very few principals work as teachers and as part-time principals. In the schools observed, the principals were full-time principals in peripatetic practices and did not teach (Author 1, 2022). In Finland, on the other hand, principals are required to have a master's degree and teacher qualification, as well as compulsory studies in educational administration and leadership. Teaching and leading are intertwined, as most principals in comprehensive education also work as teachers. Teaching principals are especially common in small rural schools (Sandén, 2007).

Teacher education in Finland has been a research-based master's programme provided by universities since the 1970s. It gives teachers in-depth knowledge of pedagogy and didactics, and the competence to analyse and develop their own work. Teacher education consists of both theoretical studies and practice periods. Primary school teachers, who teach 6–12-year-olds (pre-school to grade 6), have a master's degree with pedagogy as the main subject, and write a thesis in the field of education. They are general teachers (class teachers) who also specialise in the didactics of one or two subjects. Lower secondary (ages 13–15 years, grades 7–9) and upper secondary teachers, on the other hand, are specialist subject teachers, whose theses are subject-based (Hansén & Eklund, 2014; Tirri, 2014). Most of the practice periods are arranged at special training schools connected to universities, but they also take place in local schools all over the country. In the Swedish-speaking teacher education programme at Åbo Akademi University, the local schools are chosen by the teacher students themselves. The university training school at Åbo Akademi University (Övningsskolan) has single-grade classes and multigrade classes, since it is important to provide knowledge about how to teach in a multigrade class where pupils of different ages are in the same group, which is often the case in small schools. Multi-age and multigrade teaching can also be arranged for educational purposes and benefits. However, teaching methods for multigrade classes are not very familiar to most teachers, so more research into small schools is required and the findings would need to be more fully integrated into teacher education (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Lindblad & Oksanen, 2021). The teaching approach in small schools is connected to the local and historical values of place. When rural teachers embed local knowledge into their teaching, this supports meaningful learning. Additionally, the relationship with the community may create valuable educational possibilities and social capital (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). These aspects may, however, be invisible and need to be acknowledged in pre-service teacher education. Hardwick-Franco (2019) suggest that rural families may value different knowledge than the knowledge afforded in standardized tests. 'This knowledge is valuable to nations' health and economies and may require

knowledge in addition to, and different from, that being tested' (Hardwick-Franco, 2019, p. 304). This is also stressed by (Karlberg-Granlund, in print), as 'recognition of rural lifestyles and the countryside is a matter of sustainability for the future, in a world worth living in for all'. The special relationship between a school and the local community can also be seen as a form of symbiosis, which may create a clear need for the teachers to find a constructive balance between their professional and private life. During the final year of the Salute project, teacher students were invited to participate, which created unique opportunities for dialogue between in-service teachers and pre-service teachers, mutually supporting each other's learning about the pedagogy and culture of small rural schools.

Swedish policymakers seem to lack any awareness of small rural schools. Previously, the Swedish National Agency for Education operated with the concept of small multi-grade schools, referred to as *B-skola*. This is no longer in use, and these schools are hidden in the statistics. Multigrade teaching is not mentioned in the regulations on teacher education. In Sweden two aspects of the teacher education act as constraints to teaching in small rural schools, these are the special training schools (*övningskolor*) that do not allow students to practise in small rural schools, and the subject-specific teacher education that precludes one-teacher schools. Education in teaching in multigrade classes is limited in Swedish teacher education by a reform regarding the development of training schools for teacher education which does not invite small schools to act as training schools. The workplace learning in teacher education does not therefore include classes that are grade heterogeneous. In this sense, rural schools are excluded as they are not able to educate teacher students through the teacher education in training schools. The staff that work at training schools are still employed by the school provider but they participate in a special training programme at university in how to educate teacher students. There are only a few training schools per region and to become a training school you must be able to receive a greater number of teacher students than any small school has the bandwidth for. This criteria for becoming a training school is somewhat recent, and students could previously do their workplace training in a school of their choice and thus choose to have their workplace training in a small rural multigrade school. Only one of the six teachers interviewed had done their workplace training in a rural school, and she highlighted the importance this had on her choice to become a teacher in a small rural school, and also to work there with confidence. Another teacher described her uncertainty regarding her everyday practice. She described a feeling of not knowing what to do and how to organize the education in a multigrade school. Another problem with the Swedish teacher education is that it is subject specific. Swedish teachers are qualified to teach specific subjects in the school years 1–7 or 4–9. According to small rural schools this is a constraint for one-teacher schools. In Swedish schools teachers therefore travel between small rural schools to teach some subjects, such as music, art and handicrafts. Furthermore, they teach subjects for which they are not trained to teach, so they have to learn to teach the subject while they teach. This gives rise to a specific need for professional in-service learning.

Professional learning in everyday practices in small rural schools

This section describes the two national cases and how they differ. As the data contains different aspects of professional learning, the findings are somewhat broad.

The arrangement in Sweden departs from the Nordic models and welfare state, in that a sum of money, called the *skolpeng*, is allocated per student and schools compete to get pupils (Fjellman, 2019; Fjellman et al., 2019). According to the ethnographic data studied, there are too few pupils in the rural schools for the schools to cover their own costs. These schools are therefore expensive, which creates a feeling of guilt for the teachers as they are not able to teach more efficiently or effectively just because they have fewer pupils in the classrooms. This also makes them grateful for getting the opportunity to meet other teachers in the area as they do not take this for granted.

An understanding of the different contexts of the schools is needed to describe the schools and their arrangements. All three schools had a very close relation to their local communities. The communities supported the schools with resources, and the schools showed pride in their spatial belonging. All three schools are the smallest in their principal districts. All classes are multigrade classes. All teachers are qualified and have extensive teaching experience. The first school shares its principal district with a large school that does not have multigrade teaching. The only teacher in this one-teacher school was excluded from professional learning because the professional learning was only appropriate for the larger school's teaching practices. The teacher expressed feeling alienated in meetings with the teachers from the larger school and therefore stopped participating in these meetings. In the researcher's interview with the principal, the principal problematized the teacher's absence from these meetings and considered forcing the small-school teacher to attend, but did not mention adapting the timetable, the place nor the agenda to fit the small school's multigrade teaching practices.

The two other schools in the Swedish ethnographic study shared principal districts with schools of a similar size with multigrade teaching. According to the interviewees, when these teachers met, they greeted each other with hugs and happiness. They expressed a feeling of belonging to the district. One principal had given a name to her district, and this added to the sense of belonging that was present there. The teachers in these districts visited the other small schools on a regular basis. Their feeling of belonging to the local context and communities helped them to understand the other teachers' sense of belonging to their communities. In meetings, the teachers discussed their multigrade teaching practices and seemed to learn from each other's experiences and knowledge base, but also produced new knowledge in their practice. One principal district held digital meetings every second week. In these digital meetings the teachers adapted research knowledge to their multigrade-teaching settings because every teacher explored multigrade teaching and they needed to develop this knowledge together. In the other principal district, the principal invited teachers to dinner meetings and there were social arrangements to build trust in the practices. During the dinner meetings the teachers and principal learned how to teach in small rural schools together. They also reflected on how to handle the closeness to the pupils and parents,

how to build education programmes that are strongly connected to the local environment and historical experiences in the communities, and how to educate pupils so that they become responsible adults both in Sweden and in the world.

In districts that contained schools with similar teaching practices (such as multigrade teaching) the district provided learning and even a social network to prevent the sense of loneliness that teachers could otherwise experience. Nonetheless, if all small rural schools in the municipality were combined into one principal district, this principal would then be the only principal in the municipality who understood small rural schools. Thus, being the only principal managing small rural schools in the municipality is a constraint to principals' own professional learning. One principal explained that the other principals that managed larger schools in the municipality did not understand her job or the specific practices that the small rural schools had to deal with. The principals experienced professional isolation in that they saw how the teachers enjoyed and learned from the district meetings, but they themselves did not have a similar practice for their own development.

Hardwick-Franco (2019, p. 302) conclude that it is important for principals to understand the school context. Professional development for rural principals needs to be co-created and tailored to meet the demands of leading schools in a local rural context, while at the same time addressing global issues impacting the local schools. A similar approach was prevalent in the design and co-creation of the Salute project for teachers and principals in small schools in Finland. Recognition of the professional development needs of teachers and principals and collaborative tailoring of a professional development project together with the participants, created a sustainable approach. Three parallel activities were arranged: tailored professional development, personal development projects (professional, school or classroom development issues), and collegial mentorship and support. As early as 2014, when such activities were still very unusual, through networking with other organisations the project also arranged a seminar and a video conference for and about rural village schools simultaneously in Finland and Sweden. Being a teaching principal or a teacher with administrative duties in a small school is not an easy task, and the time allowed for leadership and administration may not be sufficient given the actual workload involved.

Discussion and conclusions

Our studies of how the architectures in Finland and Sweden prefigure the professional learning of teachers and principals in small rural schools, and the support that may be needed to attract teachers and principals to small rural schools, have led us to a number of conclusions, as described below.

Despite the differences between the countries, the arrangements of small rural schools may have more similarities than differences. Larzén-Östermark (2011) argues that internal frameworks such as culture and local society are more important for the principals' work than external frameworks. Our findings uncover similar practices in the professional learning of the teachers in that an understanding of, and adaptation

to, the local society is common in both Sweden and Finland. The external frameworks in Finland and Sweden seem to differ substantially, but the local contexts are similar, actualising similar themes in professional learning. In terms of the equality aspect of the Nordic models, there are more similarities between small rural schools in Finland and Sweden, than between Swedish small rural schools and Swedish large urban schools. Despite the fact that the professionals in these studies come to the practices differently, as Kemmis (2021) explains, as practices emerge they are adapted to the special teaching that multigrade classes require.

In this specific and unique context, the professional learning of Swedish teachers is made possible by the principal district, however national or Nordic cooperation is required to address the fact that principals lack colleagues. As (Hardwick-Franco, 2018) argues, educational leadership is different in the countryside, thus rural school principals, as well as teachers, require professional development that is adapted to the rural context.

Small and rural schools need to be emphasised within national policies and Nordic models, as a way to ensure equality. Despite the fact that Nordic models aim for 'social justice, equity, equal opportunities, inclusion, nation building and democratic participation for all students, regardless of social and cultural background and abilities' (Imsen et al., 2017, p. 568), the Nordic models for small rural schools still tend to be forgotten. If competition between schools is more important than the welfare state and equality as explored in Sweden (Lundahl, 2016), then the poor and the small have to be given a voice, as Ewen (2018) describes. This study provides a small contribution to enabling small rural schools and the professionals within them to be heard.

Since the geographic topography of the Nordic countries is quite similar with long coastlines and mountains in some of the countries, the countries face similar challenges and could learn from each other. This study unveils some similarities in professional learning and as such, we propose that by continuing this conversation, *Nordic models for rural education* can be further explored and developed.

To attract teachers and principals to small rural schools we suggest the establishment of a number of supportive structures in the education of teachers and principals, and in their continuing professional development:

- Encourage and enable teacher students to do their teacher-training in small rural schools to be better prepared for the challenges of this context.
- Acknowledge the characteristics of small rural schools and communities by recognizing the close school-community ties in rural areas and building on them.
- Tailor site-based professional development for teachers and principals in rural areas and initiate collaborative action-research projects.
- Develop in-service remote education, as well as collegial mentoring and networking for teachers and principals in small rural schools.
- Create new possibilities for networking between small rural schools in Nordic regions.

Some of these suggestions are already being realised, for instance through *Glesbygdsskolenätverket*² in Sweden. Furthermore, the experiences gained from the Salute project in Finland were encouraging. Recognition of the uniqueness of, as well as similarities between, rural small school contexts empowers the teachers and principals, and enables new possibilities for collaboration with the best interest of pupils in mind. A Nordic professional association for rural educators and principals may need to be established. Additionally, awareness of small and/or rural schools needs to be put on the agenda for teacher and principal education and for policymakers.

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